



The Letterpress Project

An Interview With Saviour Pirotta

Q1. What are your earliest memories of books and reading? For example, did you have a favourite or inspirational book?

I was an obsessive reader from a very early age. I have always liked books. My parents are very devout Catholics and most of the books in our house were Bible stories. I read them over and over again. I then discovered a book of old classics that an aunt had used during her teacher training. I remember reading Dicken's Great Expectations and wishing I could help Miss Havisham. My elder brother did Ian Serrailier's The Silver Sword at school and I secretly borrowed his copy and read it locked in the loo. It has a very enigmatic character called Jan, who is a street boy during World War 2 and has a wooden box full of secret treasures, one of which turns out to be a silver letter opener shaped like a sword. I immediately made my own box of secrets which I still have to this very day. But the book that left the biggest impression on me, and made me want to become an author was The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. The idea that you could step into a piece of furniture and discover a magical universe blew my mind.

Q2. What inspired you to become an author / illustrator?

I have always been a storyteller. I used to tell stories in the school playground and I found out it I enjoyed doing it. I loved giving old stories and legends a new twist. At school, writing stories was the thing I loved most. I was pretty useless at most other subjects except history but writing I was good at. I sort of assumed that storytelling in one form or another would be an important part of my future.

Q3. For you, what makes a successful book or illustration?

For me, the hallmark of a good story, whether it's told in words or pictures, or both, is that it creates a character that stays with you for a long time, possibly forever. I'm

thinking Oliver Twist, Jadis, Aslan and Mr. Tumnus in TLTWATW, The Snow Queen, Long John Silver, George in the Famous Five, Willy Wonka in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. If the author can create a character that is unique but also someone who the readers can empathise with, then you're on to a winner.

Q4. Do you have a specific audience in mind when you write your books / plan your illustrations?

I do a lot of school visits and I talk to a lot of children not only in the UK but in the many countries I visit. When I write, I have them in mind. I come from an underprivileged background so I tend to connect a lot with children who are somehow askew of the norm.

Q5. What future do you think the physical book has? For example, do you think the electronic book will replace the physical book?

I like to think that paper books will always be with us. It seems that readers want the physical experience of holding a book in their hands and turning the pages. When you read a physical book, you can feel its weight shifting in your hands as you progress. I do have a kindle which I use mostly when I am travelling, or if I need a book for research purposes in a hurry, especially if it's an American book and it will take weeks to arrive. But I just don't enjoy the experience of reading off a screen so much. I spend a lot of time onscreen nowadays, communicating with people, writing, banking, shopping etc. So I prefer to hold a book in my hand when I want to relax and just enjoy a story. Also, it's now been established that looking at screens before bedtime disrupts your sleep patterns. I read somewhere that kids prefer physical books. Good on them, kids are always right.

Q6. Are you a book collector? Is there a special book you'd love to own?

I still have the old books I discovered in my aunt's school trunk. Some of them are very old, with beautiful Art Nouveau designs on the covers. Over the years, I must have amassed a few thousand books. I find it impossible to give them away. When I moved up North a few years ago, I rented a stall in a flea market to offload some of my book collection. When the first few books went, I regretted it and brought all the ones left back home. If I really like a classic, I buy all the different editions I find. I have multiple copies of Rosemary Sutcliff's Eagle of the Ninth and Treasure Island. I buy lots of second hand books and I just love the doodles you find inside, and the dedications. I've found old bookmarks too. Is there a special book I'd like to own? Yes, but I don't think I ever will because I don't know the title. I found part of a book in my aunt's trunk. It was a story set in a magical version of the Middle East, probably Baghdad. The part I read involved two scoundrels who stole some Turkish

Delight. When they ate, they rose in the air like balloons and got swept away by the wind. I don't know how the story ended or indeed how it began but I still dream of one day finding a whole copy of that book. It would have pride of place in my collection.